



Apollo's Fire opens season with three Brandenburgs of Bach

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By **Donald Rosenberg, The Plain Dealer**

Audiences have come to expect surprises from Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra, which is one reason the ensemble is so popular. Music director Jeannette Sorrell's programs are inventive and instructive, and the musicians never sound like they're performing artistic chores.

So it was delightful to see a stage occupied only by natural-horn players at the start of the concert Friday at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights opening Apollo's Fire's 21st season. Paul Avril and Todd Williams, standing on opposite sides of the platform, raised their bells and performed fanfares that sounded like alfresco calls to arms.

Then Sorrell and her merry Apollonians rushed on to offer an evening of music by Bach. Most of the night was devoted to three Brandenburg concertos, so-called for Bach's gift of six works to the ungrateful margrave of Brandenburg.

Apollo's Fire ended last season with half of the concertos, so this opening program filled in the gaps with Nos. 1, 2 and 5. As before, conductor-harpsichordist Sorrell and company brought lively shaping and imaginative nuances to each piece. The playing was at all times alert to detail, articulation and harmonic potential.

Sorrell told the audience Apollo's Fire hasn't performed the first and second Brandenburgs often – and the first only on a recording – due to the difficulty of the brass parts. They were written for natural instruments without keys or other means of altering pitches, aside from subtle manipulation of lips or, for the horns, use of the right hand in the bell.

In the performances of the first and second concertos on this occasion, the brass players used instruments with vent holes – not in existence during the

REVIEW

Apollo's Fire

What: The Cleveland Baroque Orchestra, led by music



Courtesy of
Apollo's Fire

Josh Cohen is trumpet soloist this weekend in Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 with Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra.

Baroque era – to help them with certain pitches.

Avil and Williams fared elegantly, for the most part, on their demanding roles in the first concerto. They blended beautifully with their colleagues and stood out like aristocratic hunting-horn chums when required.

The other excellent soloists were oboist Debra Nagy and concertmaster Olivier

Brault, who made dashing work of his duties on a piccolo violin, which looks like an instrument shrunk in a Baroque washing machine.

In the second Brandenburg, Sorrell welcomed Josh Cohen to tackle the treacherous trumpet part. Cohen did brave work in the stratosphere, hitting most of Bach's notes amid displays of acrobatic virtuosity. Brault, now playing a regular Baroque violin, phrased with fresh appeal and Kathryn Montoya brought buoyant grace to the recorder lines.

The "happiest" work on the program, as Sorrell called it, was the fifth Brandenburg, with its dizzying harpsichord cadenza (which elicited a "Wow!" from an audience member after Sorrell played it) and chipper and tender encounters with violin (Brault, vivid once more) and transverse flute (the ever-refined Kathie Stewart).

The only departures from Brandenburg-land were the Sinfonia from Cantata BWV12 and last movement from the reconstructed Oboe Concerto in G minor, also known in a version for harpsichord. Oboist Nagy played both works with the mellow expressivity audiences have savored at Apollo's Fire and Les Delices, the Cleveland early-music ensemble she directs.

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director Jeannette Sorrell, opens its 21st season with a program of music by Bach.

When: 8 p.m. today and 4 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Fairmount Presbyterian Church, 2757 Fairmount Blvd., Cleveland Heights (today) and Rocky River Presbyterian Church, 21750 Detroit Rd., (Sunday).

Tickets: \$21-\$60. Go to apollosfire.org or call 216-320-0012.